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Evidence Review

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Violence against children: Impact of parenting and community-based programs in low-and middle-income countries

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Abstract

This evidence review examines the effectiveness of parenting and community-based programs in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) aimed at reducing violence against children. The study synthesizes data from various interventions to understand the impact on reducing physical, emotional, and sexual violence within homes and communities. Key findings reveal that while certain parenting programs show substantial reductions in violence, community-based interventions yield varied results, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches that consider local cultural and social dynamics.

Main points

- Parenting programs that focus on non-violent discipline and positive parenting practices have proven effective in significantly reducing physical and emotional abuse against children in LMICs.

- Community-based interventions show mixed results, with success largely dependent on the extent of community engagement and the integration of services to change supportive norms of violence.

- There is limited evidence on the effectiveness of interventions in preventing sexual abuse and addressing neglect,

1 Background and objectives

Over a billion children worldwide, aged between 2 and 18 years, are affected by violence, with it being more prevalent in LMICs (Hillis et al., 2016; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). This violence does not only cause immediate harm; it also leads to long-term wellbeing issues such as mental health struggles, physical impairments, disabilities, and even death (Hughes et al., 2017; Mehta et al., 2023, O'Sullivan et al., 2018). Furthermore, it places a significant economic and societal burden on communities (Fang et al., 2015). Violence against children refers to any form of physical, sexual, or emotional harm inflicted upon individuals under the age of 18, whether perpetrated by adults or peers. It encompasses various acts such as physical abuse, sexual exploitation, neglect, and psychological maltreatment (United Nations, 2006). This definition excludes practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage, which are distinct issues but are often associated with broader discussions of violence against children. This review focuses on violence against children **within their homes, that is usually perpetrated by their parents**. Additionally, while this review primarily focuses on violence against children, **intimate partner violence (IPV),** recognized as a form of child maltreatment due to its impact on children witnessing it, is considered relevant and included in the review.

One of the key strategies to combat this issue is through **parenting programs**. These programs, which encompass activities and services designed to enhance parenting knowledge, skills, and competencies, have been recognized as an important tool in preventing and reducing violence against children (World Health Organization, 2016; UNICEF, 2020). **Community interventions** refer to collective efforts aimed at preventing or reducing violence within a specific community or societal context. These interventions often involve mobilizing community members, organizations, and resources to create supportive environments, promote awareness, and implement preventive measures (WHO, 2008). This knowledge review examines the **relationship between parenting programs and community-based programs on violence against children**.

2 Methodology

This evidence review process was initiated with a foundation of previously known papers that set the preliminary context for our topics of interest. To expand upon this base and ensure a thorough exploration of the subjects, we conducted a targeted search on the 3ie Evidence Portal, a reputable repository for systematic reviews and evaluations related to international development interventions. Our search criteria were focused on systematic reviews within our areas of interest – i.e. violence against children – aiming to capture a broad spectrum of evidence-based findings and insights.

Additionally, recognizing the importance of the most recent research to capture evolving insights and emerging evidence, we extended our search on the 3ie Evidence Portal to include independent studies published from 2020 to 2024. We also searched the Web of Science to look for studies published since 2020. Due to the lack of evidence on community-based programs on violence against children, the search was extended to studies published since 2010. This allowed us to incorporate the latest data and analyses on the effectiveness of parenting and community-based interventions targeting violence against children. Through this search strategy, we aimed to construct a comprehensive overview of current knowledge and identify gaps where future research could contribute to our understanding of effective parenting interventions in LMICs.

3   Literature review

3.1   Parenting programs

3.1.1   Violence against children

A recent scoping review by Wang and Zhang (2023) provides a comprehensive overview of parenting programs aimed at preventing violence against children in LMICs, with a significant emphasis on interventions conducted in Africa and Asia, particularly in East Africa (Tanzania, Kenya, and South Sudan), South Africa, and Southeast Asia (Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia). Most of the interventions targeted younger children (under 10 years old), all of them were group-based and a significant portion of the programs were delivered by trained local community/childcare workers or lay workers. The interventions considered cover positive parenting practices, non-violent discipline strategies, stress or anger management, dealing with conflict and problem solving, the basic needs and the developmental characteristics of children, potential dangers of violence, and crisis response and economic management.

Wang and Zhang (2023) analyze the results of 31 interventions. While violence against children was the primary outcome in all studies, papers vary in the forms of maltreatment considered and reported on. 24 trials (77.4%) measured general maltreatment (which includes physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, neglect, and any behavior that harms or is likely to harm the child), with 18 (75.0%) showing significant reductions as a result of the parenting programs. All 16 interventions (100%) that assessed physical abuse or corporal punishment reported significant decreases. Among the studies that looked at emotional abuse, 13 out of 14 (92.9%) reported significant improvements. Of the 7 interventions that measured neglect, 4 (57.1%) found significant reductions, illustrating varied effects on this specific outcome. Only one study measured sexual abuse, and it reported no significant effects from the intervention. The review also emphasizes that out of the 21 trials that measure positive parenting strategies, 15 (76.2%) show notable improvements.

Crucial components of these interventions include the promotion of positive parenting and non-violent discipline strategies. Positive parenting practices encompass strategies and approaches that foster a supportive, nurturing, and non-violent environment for children's development. These practices include consistent and compassionate communication, setting clear boundaries and expectations in a respectful manner, engaging in active listening, offering praise and positive reinforcement for good behavior, and using non-punitive discipline techniques. The aim is to promote children's self-esteem, emotional intelligence, and social skills by emphasizing love, support, and guidance rather than punishment. For adolescents (above 10 years old), all implemented programs are based on the Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) program, indicating a lack of evidence on the breadth and effectiveness of parenting interventions for this older age group. Further, there is a lack of evidence concerning sexual abuse and child neglect.

The findings from Wang and Zhang (2023) are further enriched by the systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by McCoy et al. (2020), which specifically investigates parenting programs aimed to reduce child maltreatment, harsh or dysfunctional parenting, teach positive child behavior management strategies or improve parent-child relationship either as primary or secondary outcomes in East and

Southeast Asia. This analysis scrutinizes the effectiveness of parenting interventions in reducing violence against children, including abusive, harsh, or negative parenting practices. McCoy et al. found that such interventions have a statistically significant, but small effect on reducing abusive parenting behaviors.

In addition to the parenting programs, a 2021 systematic review, Little et al. (2021) shed light on the effects of combining cash transfers with child protection interventions (defined as violence prevention and parenting interventions), a strategy aimed at enhancing child welfare in high-poverty and food-insecure contexts. These combined programs, designed within an early child development framework, predominantly utilized home visits, with some incorporating small-group and village assembly components to strengthen community engagement. While these integrated approaches were effective in reducing violent discipline practices among parents, meta-analysis indicated that Cash + Child Protection programs did not significantly outperform cash transfers alone in diminishing parental violent discipline or in promoting exclusive positive parenting practices. Ismayilova and Karimli (2018) find, however, that when working with ultra-poor families in Burkina Faso, an economic intervention plus family coaching was more successful in reducing harsh discipline and improving child-parent relationships than only receiving an economic intervention.[1]

3.1.2 Intimate partner violence

Violence against children and intimate partner violence (IPV) often occur within the same families, and witnessing IPV is considered child maltreatment. While we have not been able to identify any systematic review that looks at the effect of parenting on IPV (or domestic violence in general) in LMICs, we have identified two recent studies. Cao et al. (2021) do not find an effect of a parenting intervention on IPV in Ghana while Jensen et al. (2021) find that both VAC and IPV decreased after a parenting intervention embedded in a social protection program in Rwanda. The two studied interventions are considerably different. Jensen et al. (2021) use a home-visit program and target the poorest families in Rwanda. The aim of the parenting program was to improve early child development and reduce violence and use psychoeducation and active coaching of caregivers to promote responsive caregiving, nutrition, hygiene, and non-violent interactions among household members. Further, active participation of both female and male caregivers in childcare and household decision-making was encouraged. Cao et al. (2021) investigate the effect of a group-based maternal and mental health intervention and did not specifically target IPV. Thus, the combination of home-visits and a curriculum specifically targeting IPV may explain why Jensen et al. (2021) find an effect while Cao et al. (2021) do not.

3.2   Community-based interventions

3.2.1 Violence against children

Research on community-based interventions targeting violence against children remains limited, highlighting a significant gap in the literature. According to Edwards et al. (2024), no studies in sub-Saharan Africa have explored the impact of community-level interventions aimed at changing norms and values that support violence against children. Similarly, Ellermeijer et al. (2023) identified 38 articles on

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[1] The economic intervention included savings group formation and training, livelihood planning training, seed capital grants and biweekly to monthly one-on-one mentoring and coaching.

community-based child protection efforts, yet only five evaluated the effects of specific interventions, emphasizing the scarcity of detailed effectiveness analyses. Cuartas et al. (2024) also noted a general lack of research from LMICs on strategies to prevent violence against children in the home.

Despite these gaps, some individual studies have shown promising results. In Tanzania's Rombo District, Reuben et al. (2022) investigated the effectiveness of Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms (CBCPMs), part of Tanzania's National Plan of Action to Eliminate Violence against Women and Children. These CBCPMs, structured as women and child protection committees, employ several strategies aimed at combating sexual violence against children. Key strategies include community mobilization to alter norms that perpetuate acceptance of sexual violence, establishment of vigilant reporting mechanisms, enhancement of service access and referrals for victims to receive medical, legal, and psychological support, and improved case management through collaboration among police, social welfare, and health services. Additionally, the intervention focuses on the sustainability of child protection services by integrating them into local community and government structures. The study demonstrated that these CBCPMs significantly reduced incidents of sexual violence against children by creating a more protective community environment and ensuring effective support and management for victims.

In Uganda, two community-based interventions have demonstrated impacts on violence against children and the broader community dynamics. The SASA! program, explored by Kyegombe et al. (2014), is a community mobilization program aimed to prevent violence against women and reduce HIV-related risk behaviors through an ecological model that promoted community engagement on gender inequality, violence, and HIV. Spanning from 2007 to 2012, the intervention involved training male and female community activists, conducting various community activities to inspire critical reflection and activism, and engaging stakeholders through local activism, media, and advocacy. The program's effectiveness was assessed through a cluster randomized controlled trial which found a significant decrease in intimate partner violence (IPV), with the prevalence of children witnessing IPV in their homes reduced by an estimated 64%. Additionally, qualitative findings suggested improvements in parenting and discipline practices, including a shift away from corporal punishment, thereby enhancing parent-child relationships and increasing community responsibility for child protection.

Complementing the SASA! program, the UPLIFT initiative examined by Doh et al. (2021) sought to enhance child protection through socio-economic improvement and civic transformations within Kampala's impoverished slum areas. This intervention included community empowerment and education to raise awareness of children's rights, vocational training, and economic support to boost family incomes, along with health and psychosocial support to foster critical thinking and legal education on child protection laws. The evaluation found significant enhancements in community engagement and awareness leading to improved reporting of child abuse. Doh et al. also report on a significant reduction in corporal punishment, child labor, sexual abuse, and commercial sex. They note, however, that the reduction in corporal punishment is not confirmed by the qualitative analysis. Further, the program encountered challenges in addressing systemic barriers in law enforcement and persistent harmful cultural practices, such as child sacrifice and FGM.

Corboz et al. (2019) conducted an intervention in the Jawzjan province of Afghanistan, led by Help the Afghan Children (HTAC), aimed at preventing violence against children. The intervention utilized an approach combining school-based peace education with community-based initiatives to address harmful

social norms related to gender and violence. Key components included implementing a peace education curriculum in secondary schools, engaging community members in discussions on non-violent conflict resolution and gender rights, and capacity-building sessions for local teachers and community members. The evaluation utilized a cross-sectional interrupted time series design with three data collection points over 12 months, involving surveys distributed to students in 11 secondary schools. The results indicated significant reductions in peer violence, corporal punishment, and reports of observing family violence among both boys and girls. Additionally, there was an improvement in gender attitudes and school attendance, particularly among girls. This comprehensive approach not only targeted the behavior of children and teachers but also engaged the broader community to create environments that discourage violence and promote gender equality and peace.

Lastly, Doyle et al. (2018) present findings from a randomized controlled trial conducted in Rwanda, focusing on the "Bandebereho Intervention," a gender-transformative program aimed at engaging men and their partners in reproductive and maternal health while preventing violence. The 15-session curriculum covered topics such as gender equality, fatherhood, violence prevention, and reproductive health. Results indicated a significant reduction in physical punishment against children, reduced intimate partner violence, increased male involvement in reproductive health, and improved gender equality in household tasks within the intervention group compared to the control group.

Together, these studies from Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Afghanistan illustrate the effectiveness of community-based interventions in diverse settings. Each program's approach and outcomes provide crucial insights into the potential of community initiatives to foster environments that protect children from violence.

3.2.2 Intimate partner violence

Community-based programs have shown potential in addressing intimate partner violence (IPV) by transforming harmful gender norms and engaging community members actively. These interventions, which typically blend educational activities with community mobilization, strive to alter attitudes and behaviors regarding gender and violence.

A recent systematic review by Sabri et al. (2023) examined the impact of various interventions on gender-based violence (GBV) at structural, community, interpersonal, individual, and multiple levels. The review highlighted that out of an initial set of 60 interventions, 38 demonstrated a direct impact on GBV, and the review focuses only on these interventions. In terms of effective community interventions, Sabri et al. identify one: the Male Norms Initiative in Ethiopia. Targeting young men aged 15–24, this project significantly reduced violence perpetration through a combination of community mobilization and interactive education over ten months, employing methods such as newsletters, leaflets, drama workshops, role plays, and group discussions to challenge harmful gender norms.

The review also found that community engagement strategies, including mobilization and capacity building such as training community leaders, were more effective at addressing victimization rather than perpetration. Approximately 67% of these interventions reported positive outcomes for victimization, while only 40% showed reductions in perpetration.

Moreover, Spangero et al. (2021) in their systematic review of IPV and sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict states, as well as other humanitarian crises in LMICs, analyzed 18 papers. Of these, 8 included a social norm component that targeted the transformation of harmful gender norms and stereotypes, and 3 included community mobilization efforts. These mobilizations engaged community leaders, institutions, and members to proactively prevent and address violence against women. One intervention involved community members creating and screening films on gender rights and respectful relationships, which reached approximately 25,000 people across five countries. This initiative not only enhanced dialogue but also led to increased reporting of GBV and actions against forced marriage.

Lastly, Ellsberg and colleagues (2015) evaluated community mobilization strategies to reduce violence through societal changes in public discourse, practices, and gender norms. Unlike targeted group-training programs, community mobilization seeks broader impacts by engaging diverse groups including community men, women, youth, and local leaders. These programs often utilize a mix of group training, public events, and advocacy campaigns, such as the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence. Leveraging technology through social media and mobile apps like Hollaback, Circle of Six, and Safetipin, these strategies disseminate information on violence prevention and provide emergency assistance. The SASA! program in Kampala, Uganda, for instance, suggested a 54% reduction in the community prevalence of physical partner violence, albeit with non-significant results, showcasing the potential of community mobilization to effect substantial and sustainable changes in attitudes and behaviors regarding gender-based violence across various settings.

4   Discussion

Parenting programs: The existing literature provides substantial evidence on the effectiveness of parenting programs in reducing violence against children in LMICs. These programs, as highlighted by Wang and Zhang (2023), are largely successful due to their focus on improving parenting skills, implementing non-violent discipline strategies, and fostering positive parent-child interactions. Group-based interventions delivered by trained community workers have shown decreases in both physical and emotional abuse, illustrating their potential to transform parenting practices and reduce child maltreatment. Each study targeting physical abuse or corporal punishment within these programs reported improvements, demonstrating the direct impact of structured, culturally sensitive parenting education.

Despite these positive outcomes, the research addressing the effects of parenting programs on IPV is less developed. This gap is significant because IPV and child maltreatment often occur concurrently within families. Understanding how interventions aimed at improving parenting can also impact the dynamics of IPV remains a critical area for further investigation.

Community-based programs: Community-based interventions have been extensively reviewed for their impact on IPV. For example, a systematic review by Sabri et al. (2023) examined interventions at structural, community, interpersonal, individual, and multiple levels across LMICs. This review highlighted that community mobilization and educational campaigns are effective in changing attitudes and reducing incidents of IPV. These interventions typically involve training community leaders, engaging local stakeholders, and deploying public education efforts that challenge existing norms and encourage new behaviors towards gender equality and non-violence.

Contrastingly, the literature on the effectiveness of community-based programs specifically targeting violence against children is markedly less developed. Edwards et al. (2024) noted in their systematic review a significant gap in research focused on community-level interventions to prevent VAC in Sub-Saharan Africa. This review underscores a critical research deficiency: there are few rigorous evaluations that assess the impact of community interventions on altering behaviors or reducing the incidence of VAC. This lack of evidence is problematic because community norms and practices significantly influence children's safety and wellbeing. While some individual studies, like the evaluation of Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms (CBCPMs) in Tanzania, show promising results in reducing specific types of violence such as sexual violence against children, these are exceptions rather than the norm. The scarcity of systematic and comprehensive research on community-based interventions aimed directly at VAC points to an urgent need for focused studies that could provide a clearer picture of what works and why.

5   Recommendations

Parenting programs: Implement Strategies to Reduce Violence Against Children and Domestic Violence

- Promote positive parenting and non-violent discipline strategies through group-based programs and activities that encourage reflection, discussion, and learning among caregivers.
- Address the needs of adolescents by expanding program content to include age-appropriate interventions that consider the unique challenges faced by this group.
- Explore integrated approaches that combine cash transfers with child protection interventions to enhance child welfare, particularly in contexts of high poverty and food insecurity.

Community-based programs:

- Foster the active involvement of community members in child protection initiatives. Train community leaders and influencers to recognize signs of child maltreatment and mobilize local resources to prevent VAC. This approach ensures local ownership and sustainability of the programs.
- Launch targeted public education campaigns to change societal norms that tolerate or ignore violence against children. Use community gatherings, schools, and local media to educate the public on the detrimental effects of VAC and promote non-violent parenting practices.
- Develop coordinated networks that connect healthcare, legal, social, and educational services to provide comprehensive support to victims of child violence. This integration facilitates smoother referrals and quicker access to necessary interventions, enhancing the overall effectiveness of child protection measures.
- Conduct regular evaluations of community-based programs to assess their effectiveness in preventing VAC. Use the insights gained to continuously adapt and refine the strategies to better suit the local context and evolving community needs.

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